

SOME HIGHLY ENGRAVED FORT ANCIENT DISCOIDALS

by
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Discoidals are among the most unique and distinctive looking artifacts. They are often found among randomly deposited materials at the sites of former Fort Ancient villages in Ohio and adjacent states. There are many varieties of discoidals, all circular shaped and thick in cross section with typically broad flat rims. Discoidals were rolled down a compacted clay surface in a competitive game which involved attempts to alter the disc's path. During the Late Prehistoric Period the Mississippian-invented discoidal game called Chunky (Chungke) evolved in many forms with various rules. Revelations about the uses of discoidals in the game of Chunky were mostly based on early historic period observations at proto-historic Mississippian sites in the Southeast. The name Chunky or more properly Chungke was coined by the Choctaw Indians of Mississippi. Their game with varying rules from village to village followed a generalized theme involving two competing players, one rolling the disc on its rim down a lane with a smooth surface towards a designated goal. Both players ran along the lane chasing the discoidal, one trying to strike and deflect or stop the thrower's disc with a spear (javelin) before it reached its intended destination, the other player who rolled the disk sometimes trying to block his opponent's pole with his own spear. Points were awarded based on whether the disc was stopped or reached its goal and wagering on the result was a popular sidebar.

Chunky competitions were among the most popular leisure time activities in the well established Mississippian communities of the period and historians record that competing athletes were often treated as celebrities. A different version of the game employed a round disc designed with a tapered rim. This configuration made the game piece curve when thrown. The goal was to have it end up in one of several side pockets along a stone lined alley. Points were scored based on the level of difficulty in reaching certain side pockets. This Chunky game probably provided a discoidal design challenge in addition to taxing the bowling skills of the competitors.

The popularity of the game of Chunky led to its widespread acceptance and adaptation in varying forms over a broad geographic range. Among the groups in the Mississippian Chunky pipeline were the Fort Ancient populations located along the Ohio River and its adjacent riverine feeders. The Fort Ancients were already immersed in a number of Mississippian influenced cultural interchanges when their versions of discoidals were added to their extensive artifact inventories. The technology transfers probably took place during the 1100 AD to 1200 AD interval.

The Fort Ancient people in southern Ohio and adjacent portions of West Virginia, Indiana and Kentucky customized their discoidals choosing centrally perforated specimens as their preferred game pieces. A large majority of the copied Mississippian examples were un-perforated. The Fort Ancient design modifications may also have represented

practical refinements. Evidence suggests the Fort Ancients may have developed alternative applications for their perforated discs. Whereas the game of Chunky may have consumed most discoidals, some may have been used in a slightly different form as tools for more mundane utilitarian tasks. It has been suggested by some researchers that some discs, especially the perforated Fort Ancient sandstone and pottery specimens, were sometimes used as spindle whorls. Conforming shafts were fitted through the holes, the spinning discs making it possible to turn the secured shafts rapidly to spin plant fibers for clothing and other woven materials. Perforated clay specimens were specially adapted for this purpose.

Some discs might have been used as flywheels for drill shafts, to help maintain the desired turning speeds when drilling holes in tools and ornamental objects. Physical evidence of this application is lacking but this adaptation seems plausible given the innovative skills in Fort Ancient communities.

Figure 1 shows an artist's portrayal of the game of Chunky as it was played in a typical Mississippian community. The mural is currently displayed in the Angel Mounds Museum near Evansville, Indiana. Portrayed is a Chunky game competitor chasing after the rolling disc with spear in hand.

One of the most prominent identifiers of Ohio Fort Ancient discoidals is their distinctive engraved features. The designs enhance their visual appeal and add to their fascination especially when the discs are in motion. In many cases the engraved patterns are repeated on the reverse sides of Fort Ancient discs.

Figure 2 shows two of the engraved discoidals. Both are fairly small about two inches in diameter. Round punctates were used in a circular pattern as the decorative embellishments. The featured discs have a slight lip at their outer margins. They are made of sandstone and are from the Feurt Site in Scioto County, Ohio and Fox Field in Mason County, Kentucky.

Figure 3 shows four more examples with more complicated designs that seem to build on the patterns engraved on the previous discs. At the top left is a specimen with a round punctate motif separated in this case by four equidistant lines emanating from a circular pattern near the center. To its right is a disc with a vividly engraved pattern consisting of four circular punctates in a balanced motif, separated by four lines forming a triangular pattern that terminates at another circular design. A similar design appears at the bottom left. In this example the disc has the four extended lines separating four circular punctates on its slightly concave face. This example is made of limestone, the others sandstone. To its right is another example with a virtual explosion of circular punctates within and surrounding a diamond shaped pattern. The referenced engraved elements

might be termed a spoked wheel design. All of the subject discoidals are from sites bordering or near the Ohio River in Ohio and Kentucky.

Figure 4 shows four more examples. Each disc is dominated by circular patterns on their concave faces. The patterns are for the most part repeated on the reverse side. Some of the engraved decorations seem to highlight the concave and tapered portions of the surface areas. The pictured pieces are from Ohio River bordering locations and are limestone and sandstone, the most commonly used raw materials in the region.

Figure 5 shows another array of discs with the so-called spoked wheel designs. In one example, at the lower left, a somewhat unusual raw material, cannel coal, was used. This specimen came from Fox Field in Mason County, Kentucky and probably was crafted as a show piece or jewelry item rather than a functional discoidal. Similar symbolic jewelry items made of the flimsy cannel coal material have been found at Fox Field. The other pictured pieces are from neighboring sites in the Ohio River floodplain region.

Figure 6 shows a grouping of discoidals with irregular or unbalanced decorative elements. The disc at the top left displays numerous incised overlapping lines in a disorganized manner. The markings are enclosed within a circular pattern. To its right is the lone un-perforated example in the pictured artifacts. Its surface is highlighted by turkey tracks, an often seen motif on Fort Ancient artifacts. This specimen is quite thin in comparison with the other examples. The turkey track motif is not repeated on the reverse side. At the bottom left is a mica impregnated hardstone disc engraved with a series of triangles separated by incised lines running from the center hole to the outer edge. To its right is a limestone specimen with eight engraved lines in a spoke-like pattern. The central perforation is tapered. This feature is unusual and might suggest that a shaft or similar device inserted in the perforation when it was used. All of the featured artifacts except the mica dominated specimen are from sites in southern Ohio. The micaceous piece came from Richland County, Ohio.

Fort Ancient discoidals have distinctive characteristics when compared with most Mississippian specimens. Most Mississippian discoidals lack any type of engraved decorations on their surfaces. Many are massive in terms of their overall proportions and many were made of showy raw materials, such as quartz. The smaller Fort Ancient specimens are sometimes more crude in terms of their overall execution, are generally made of less durable raw materials such as sandstone. And as stated many display some type of surface decorations. Some of the designs were presented in balanced patterns that were intended to add to their visual appeal.

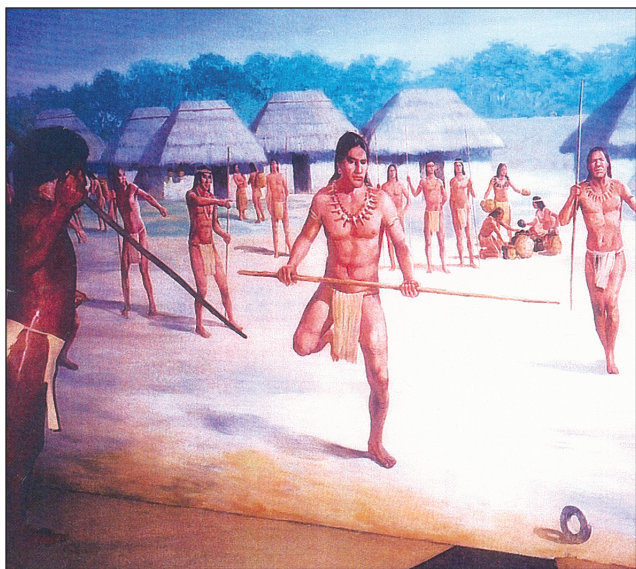


Figure 1 (Gehlbach) Mural showing competitors in the game of Chunky at the Angel Mounds Mississippian site near Evansville, Indiana



Figure 2 (Gehlbach) Fort Ancient discoidals with punctates in a circular pattern



Figure 3 (Gehlbach) Fort Ancient discoidals with punctates, circles and lined separations in a wheel pattern



Figure 4 (Gehlbach) Fort Ancient discoidals with a series of circle designs



Figure 5 (Gehlbach) Fort Ancient discoidals with different versions of the wheel pattern; one disc is made of charred coal



Figure 6 (Gehlbach) Fort Ancient discoidals with a variety of engraved designs